United Nations A/54/478

General Assembly

Distr.: General
19 October 1999

Original: English

Fifty-fourth session
Agenda item 23
Multilingualism

Multilingualism

Report of the Secretary-General

1. In its resolution 52/23 of 25 November 1997, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit to it at its fifty-fourth session a comprehensive report on the implementation of resolution 50/11 of 2 November 1995. The present report has been prepared in response to that request.

Learning of the six official languages

2. The Secretary-General is committed to promoting the learning of all official and working languages of the Organization by the staff of the Secretariat and to ensuring that adequate human and financial resources are available for maintaining the teaching of those languages. Such teaching supports the Organization's efforts to promote greater cultural awareness, multilingualism and the value of diversity. The importance of developing the linguistic competence of Secretariat staff is recognized and is reflected in the budget for the biennium 1998-1999 and in the Secretary-General's budget submission for the biennium 2000-2001 which maintains resources for language training at all levels.

3. Language programmes at major duty stations provide beginning, intermediate and advanced courses in the six official languages. To supplement the regular language courses, special courses are offered. These courses , in such specific areas as "*Techniques de présentation orale*", "*Lectures francophones*", "Active listening in the workplace", "The news in Spanish", "Russian through the media", "Reading Arabic newspapers" and "Media-assisted Chinese language", give staff the means to broaden and strengthen their knowledge of current events and culture so that they can put their acquired skills to use in their work for the Organization. In addition, in order to develop staff members' ability to communicate orally and in writing, courses are offered in giving oral presentations, improving pronunciation, drafting letters and memoranda and writing reports.

4. Self-study centres at major duty stations support the learning of languages by allowing staff members to use a variety of media — print, audio, video, computers and multimedia — to study at their own pace and according to their own schedule. Efforts are under way to use the resources of the Internet to support language-learning efforts and links to language-learning sites are being developed for the Intranet.

Language incentives

5. The administrative instruction on language proficiency and language incentives (ST/AI/1992/2) of 13 May 1999 strongly encourages staff members to become proficient in

99-30470 (E) 101199

two or more official languages of the United Nations in order to achieve and maintain linguistic balance in the Organization.

6. Language incentives are offered to staff members to study and use the official languages. Language proficiency examinations in the six official languages are conducted twice a year at over 100 test sites to staff members throughout the United Nations system. Staff members who pass these examinations receive benefits. For staff members in the Professional category and above in posts subject to geographical distribution who have adequate and confirmed knowledge of a second official language, the interval between salary increments is reduced from 12 months to 10 for grade levels P-1 to P-5 and from 24 months to 20 for grade levels D-1 and D-2. A language allowance is payable to staff in the General Service and related categories and in the Field Service category; a second language allowance is payable to staff in these categories for proficiency demonstrated by passing the prescribed examination in a third official language.

Recruitment and promotion

7. All candidates recruited for the Secretariat are required to have a full command of either English or French. Candidates sitting the national competitive examination may elect to take the exam in either of those languages. For posts requiring knowledge of an additional official language, for example at the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, which uses Spanish as a working language, the vacancy announcements will stipulate that language requirement.

8. Linguistic proficiency is one of the criteria used in the selection, assignment or promotion of staff of the Secretariat. Knowledge of languages is a factor in the evaluation by programme managers and appointment and promotion bodies of the relative competence and suitability of candidates. The Office of Human Resources Management, drawing the attention of programme managers to General Assembly resolution 50/11 on multilingualism and the need to ensure linguistic balance within the Organization, highlights the language qualifications of applicants for posts in all its presentations to departments. Programme managers are advised that linguistic proficiency should be taken into account in the selection of candidates.

Use of working languages

9. By virtue of his or her appointment, every staff member is required to work in either English or French. In addition, since the regional commissions for Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean and Western Asia also have Russian, Spanish and Arabic, respectively, as working languages, many staff members in the secretariats of those bodies are required to work in the respective languages. To promote multilingualism in the Secretariat, staff members are encouraged to make equal use of the working languages in their official communications.

Translation of documentation

10. The maintenance of staffing levels in the translation services and the stabilization of the volume of parliamentary documentation received for translation reported in the previous report of the Secretary-General (A/52/577, para. 10) continued through the current biennium, allowing the Organization to place more emphasis on the improvement of the quality of the translation of documents into the six official languages.

11. Bearing in mind that the best quality control is achieved through the revision of translations, the revision function has been maintained; at the same time, the need to improve responsiveness in terms of the timely issuance of documentation made it impossible to forgo self-revision as an alternative method of work. However, a number of measures designed to improve the quality of self-revised translations have continued to be used. The general practice has been that whenever deadlines, workload and availability of senior staff allow, documents should be translated and then revised rather than self-revised. While rates of self-revision at the main conference venues have ranged between 50 and 70 per cent, efforts continue to be made to bring the rate of self-revision in all services closer to the desirable rate of 45 per cent. Also with a view to improving the quality of translations, quality controls on contractual translations have been significantly strengthened. Furthermore, some changes have been made in the preparation and translation of summary records through greater reliance on sound recordings and written texts of statements as they are delivered in their original languages, in order to improve their quality and accuracy.

12. The timeliness of the issuance of documentation in the six official languages continues to be, to a great extent, contingent on improvements in the pattern of submission of documentation by substantive departments. On the other

hand, the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services is entirely responsible for the timeliness of the issuance of summary records. Until recently, delegations have rightly complained that delays of up to a year had occurred between the time a meeting was held and the issuance of the relevant summary record. The objective of the decision, taken prior to the fifty-third session of the General Assembly, to maintain on a regular basis a deadline for the issuance of the relevant summary records of four months after the end of a session has, by and large, been met: 87 per cent of all the summary records prepared for the Main Committees of the General Assembly at the main part of its fifty-third session were issued by 30 April 1999. The translation of summary records will continue to be given high priority, with a view to improving these statistics further.

13. Training of translators is essential in order to improve and maintain the quality of translation, as pointed out most recently by the General Assembly in its resolution 53/208 B of 18 December 1998. In addition to the on-the-job training of translators referred to in the previous report of the Secretary-General (A/52/577, para. 11), translators have been encouraged to take advantage of in-house and external training opportunities available to them. In particular, the 1999 programme for upgrading of substantive and technical skills has allowed a number of translators and revisers to attend summer language courses at universities in Egypt, France, Jordan, the Russian Federation and Spain.

14. With the objectives of improving the quality of translations through greater consistency and of achieving productivity improvements in the processing of fairly repetitive material, a computer-assisted translation (CAT) project was undertaken in July of this year. The basic principle of CAT is to automate part of the referencing work undertaken in preparation for translation through computerized extraction of previously translated material from so-called "translation memories". The scope of the initial phase of the project, which will extend into the first half of the year 2000, is relatively modest, involving six to seven translators per official language. Based on the results of the first phase of the project, the possibility for expanding the use of CAT will be determined. Provision has been made in the proposed programme budget for 2000-2001 for increasing the number of translators equipped with CAT software to up to one third of the total establishment of translation services.

Simultaneous distribution of documents

15. The simultaneous distribution of documents in all official languages, a practice that the Secretariat had always endeavoured to follow, has been applied strictly since the adoption on 10 December 1981 of General Assembly resolution 36/117 B, in which the Assembly established the rule. The same principle was later confirmed in Assembly resolution 42/207 C of 11 December 1987 in the context of the need to ensure respect for the equal treatment of the official languages and was reiterated most recently in resolution 53/208 B of 18 December 1998.

16. Simultaneous distribution means that no language version of a particular document, including the original language, is released for dissemination until the production of all the relevant versions is completed and all of them can be distributed at the same time. The rule of simultaneous distribution applies to documents intended for the information of and consideration by all United Nations organs, for example reports of the Secretary-General, including major policy documents like the medium-term plan and the proposed programme budget; reports of intergovernmental, expert, oversight and treaty bodies and special rapporteurs; communications from States; draft reports and draft decisions to be adopted by the relevant bodies; agendas and programmes of work; and resolutions and decisions. Summary records of the General Assembly are also distributed simultaneously.

17. Given the pattern of late submission of documentation by substantive departments for processing by conference services, concentrated and coordinated effort is needed by the document-processing services in order to issue the documents in time for their scheduled consideration.

18. The optical disk system, which is the official repository and distribution outlet of electronic versions of United Nations documents, also operates in accordance with the simultaneous distribution rule: the electronic versions become accessible through the system at the same time in all languages, immediately following the release of their hard-copy equivalents.

Informal meetings

19. In section I, paragraph 8, of its resolution 40/243 of 18 December 1985, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to continue to provide interpretation services for informal meetings on an ad hoc basis in accordance with established practice. Subsequently, in

paragraph 13 of its resolution 50/206 A of 23 December 1995 and paragraph 19 of its resolution 51/211 A of 18 December 1996, the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to provide, within the resources approved for conference services in the bienniums 1996-1997 and 1998-1999, interpretation services for meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States upon request by those groupings, taking into account the priority due to meetings included in the calendar of conferences and meetings. Furthermore, in paragraphs 9 and 28 of its more recent resolutions 52/214 A of 22 December 1997 and 53/208 A of 18 December 1998, respectively, the Assembly decided to include all necessary resources in the budget for the ensuing bienniums to provide interpretation services for meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States upon request by those groupings, on an ad hoc basis, in accordance with established practice.

20. The General Assembly has thus mandated the Secretariat to make provision for interpretation services for informal meetings, while at the same time stipulating that such services should be provided on an "as available" basis, that is, without any servicing capacity being specifically allocated for that purpose. The manner in which the Secretariat has addressed this mandate has derived from the actual practice of so-called "calendar" bodies. Every biennium, meetings are planned in accordance with their entitlements, and eventually scheduled on the calendar of conferences. Cancellations of meetings of calendar bodies reduce the number of meetings actually held, thereby freeing capacity to service regional and other major groupings. Services are also provided on an "as available" basis for other informal meetings such as briefings for delegations and bodies that request to convene informally outside their scheduled sessions.

Department of Public Information

21. In accordance with its mandate to promote better public understanding of the objectives and activities of the United Nations and with a view to furthering global awareness of the multicultural nature and linguistic diversity of the Organization, the Department of Public Information produces and disseminates a broad range of information materials in all mediums in both the working and, to the extent possible, other official languages of the Organization.

22. For use by its target audiences, including the media, non-governmental organizations, educational institutions, government agencies and the private sector, the Department researches, writes, publishes and distributes promotional and background print materials on the priority thematic issues of concern to the United Nations, such as peace and security, economic and social development and human rights, as well as certain political mandates. Depending on the availability of resources, these materials are produced in as many official languages as is feasible. In addition, with the assistance of the network of United Nations information centres worldwide, such information materials, including fact sheets, feature articles, background press releases, posters, brochures and booklets, are often translated and adapted for use by local audiences in the countries which the centres service. Moreover, available language versions of information materials produced by the Department are posted on the appropriate pages on the United Nations Web site.

23. The Department also continues to increase the availability of language versions of its recurrent publications. The *UN Chronicle* is published quarterly in English and French. In addition, special annual editions have been initiated this year in Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Spanish. The *UN Chronicle* Web site is now available in English and French. Its quarterly publication *Africa Recovery* is issued in English and French, with its Web site also available in both languages. *Development Business* is published in English, but it contains procurement notices in French, Spanish and Portuguese, as appropriate. The *Development Business* Web site also follows the structure used in the publication.

24. The United Nations Web site, formally launched in June 1995 in English, was supplemented by the French and Spanish pages in September 1995 and with the Russian page in May 1998. The launch of the Web pages in Arabic and Chinese in November 1998 completed the availability of the United Nations Web site in all six official languages. Efforts are ongoing to increase the level of contents on the Web site in all official languages and different aspects of this issue are currently being actively considered in the Committee on Information. In addition, the United Nations Web site contains links to the Web sites maintained by 26 United Nations information centres worldwide in English, French, Russian and Spanish, as appropriate, as well as in 11 other languages.

25. In addition, United Nations press releases issued both in New York and Geneva, as well as statements by the Secretary-General and the Deputy Secretary-General, and compendiums of General Assembly and Security Council resolutions continue to be made available in English and French on a regular basis, and occasionally in Spanish, as appropriate.

26. At present, the United Nations Web site has approximately 1 million visitors daily from over 140 countries. It features multimedia Web pages, as well as coverage of the proceedings of the General Assembly and the Security Council. Selected major documents are regularly made available through the Web site and major databases, such as those on treaties deposited with the Secretary-General, non-governmental organizations and the question of Palestine, are also available. For materials posted in English, there are links to other language sites, when available. In addition, through the optical disk system, which is also accessible through the Internet, all parliamentary documents are available in all official languages to subscribers, and to others on a cost-recovery basis.

27. The programming of United Nations Radio is produced and disseminated in all the official languages, as well as in nine other languages. The productions of United Nations Television, including both its weekly features and long-form documentaries, are also adapted in the official languages for worldwide dissemination.

28. In order to promote multilingualism in Web publishing, the Department is making every effort to adapt for use on the Web its multilingual audio-visual products already available in the traditional formats. Accordingly, audio-visual pages, featuring easy navigation among the six official languages, are being gradually introduced on the United Nations Web site, allowing for more timely and broader worldwide availability of such programming.

29. Visitors to United Nations Headquarters are offered a variety of services, including guided tours and briefing programmes. Guided tours are currently offered in 20 languages, including all official languages. Tours in languages other than English constitute some 22 per cent of the total number of tours conducted at Headquarters and proficiency in several language is a prerequisite for recruitment of tour guides. In addition, briefing programmes are available upon request both in the official and in other languages.

30. The Dag Hammarskjöld Library, a multilingual research, information and training facility of the United Nations, maintains the archival collection of United Nations documents and publications in all the languages in which they are issued. Also acquired, more selectively but generally in one or both of the two working languages, are documents and publications of specialized agencies and intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. Gazettes and national laws of Member States are acquired in their original languages and, wherever available, also in one of the two working languages.

31. The availability of other language material in the collections is determined by general demand or specific requests. Accordingly, English is the predominant language in the Library's collections, followed by French, Spanish, Russian, Arabic and Chinese. Some other languages also have significant representation, most notably German.

32. On-line and other electronic databases follow the same pattern of language predominance but, as more products become available in a wider variety of languages, a shift in the linguistic representation of these databases is becoming more noticeable.

33. Additionally, the Library has made it a priority to provide multiple dedicated Internet workstations to afford its client base the opportunity of accessing, retrieving and downloading information, either independently or with the assistance of a librarian, without prejudice to any language. Several of these workstations are equipped with utility programmes permitting browsing of Internet sites in various scripts, including Arabic and Chinese.

34. The optical disk system and the United Nations Web site have enabled the Organization to make selected United Nations documentation in all languages accessible worldwide. The Library makes a substantial contribution to this effort by providing on-line indexing and posting of research guides, databases and other materials on the United Nations Web site, with links to other available language pages. Moreover, the Library's page on the United Nations Web site has an increasing number of offerings in French, including texts of resolutions and information on depository libraries and cartographic services. Elements of the site are also available in Arabic, Chinese and Russian, with Spanish to be added in late 1999.

35. Access to United Nations documentation is also available through the United Nations Bibliographic Information System (UNBIS), which is based on the trilingual (English, French, Spanish) Thesaurus File. Work is currently under way to provide Arabic and Chinese equivalents of the Thesaurus terms, with the addition of Russian planned for late 1999.

36. The Library has also provided an extensive training programme in the management, organization and use of United Nations documentation and various electronic information resources. Whenever there is sufficient demand, individual courses are organized in languages other than English.

37. Through its Sales and Marketing Section, the Department of Public Information also continues to market sales products available in the official languages of the

Organization. As part of that effort, a comprehensive catalogue of Spanish publications was recently added to the catalogues already available in English and French, all of which have been posted on the United Nations publications Web page. The Department has also continued to pursue efforts to expand cooperation with international commercial publishers with a view to ensuring the widest dissemination of United Nations publications. As a result of translation and reprint contracts, a number of key publications have been made available in Chinese, French, Russian, Spanish and Japanese.

Conclusion

38. The Secretariat continues to follow the policy of promoting the learning and use of the official and working languages of the Organization in all its activities. In accordance with General Assembly resolution 50/11, the Organization is exerting every effort to continue to promote multilingualism.